

# A LITTLE WOMAN TO WHOM POETS SUBMIT THEIR WARES

*A Visit With the Editor of a Magazine Known All Over the World, Who Patiently Scans All Sorts of Verse and Helps Many Struggling Rhymesters*

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By Walter Yost

THERE is a prim little office in an unpretentious building on a quiet, sunlit street in Chicago. I missed it the first time I tried to find it—because I had forgotten the number and because there is no emblazoned sign outside to draw you to it. And no one in the neighborhood of a few dusty apartment houses seems ever to have heard of it.

Yet that little office has an attraction for literary folk the world over—in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, France, Scandinavia, Russia. It is the birthplace and the home of a little gray-covered magazine which has been called by Sara Teasdale the greatest single factor in the rebirth of poetry in America. It is the workshop of Harriet Monroe, poet and founder of "Poetry."

Miss Monroe was pasting up "a dummy for next month's issue" when I entered the office at 543 Cass street. I had expected to find some one rather formidable, with terrible black-rimmed spectacles—one, indeed, who would look the part of being accustomed to use an inexorable iron hand with temperamental, wild-eyed poets. As it was, I met a slim little woman, little enough to fit comfortably into her immaculate little office, who made me feel immediately at home; so much at ease, in fact, that within two minutes I was wishing the gods had willed me to fall occasionally into verse that I might be able now to submit some to her.

Her desk was in a smother of papers and volumes of poetry—one of the neatest smotherers I have ever seen. Over in one corner was an informal gallery of poets' portraits—Tagore, Yeats, Sandburg, Kilmer and many others—and a case full of new books still in their jackets. Marian Strobel, poet and associate editor, and Mita Straub, business manager of the monthly, sat working at two small desks. It wasn't long, however, in that atmosphere of neighborliness, before Miss Strobel, chatting with us, was seated gracefully with her feet tucked under her in a great chair—my impression is, this chair is the only large thing in the office—and Miss Straub was reaching from this corner to that of the room gathering "evidence" in the form of editorials and poems to supplement Miss Monroe's conversation.

"Everybody is writing verse of one sort or another and it is the borderland between prose and poetry that youth is exploring today," said Miss Monroe in her soft voice, after the talk had ceased to become general. "A fresh spirit stirs the so-called new movement in poetry. The poetry today is not so different in detail, form or diction from the older poetry; it were better to say, it simply has less of the rhetorical excesses of Victorian poetry; it is less vague, less verbose. It is being written by the youth of America in unostentatious diction and rhythm. It follows the great traditions, but is made suitable to the modern day."

FOR eight years Miss Monroe has received, from the four corners of the habitable earth, the raw outpourings of beleaguered hearts—of poets, of poets not at all, and of half-way folks who have a little of one and a bit of 't'other. Each month of the year thousands of poems settle down upon the little office—"comically pathetically bad verse," is Miss Monroe's phrase for some of it; some of it "commonplace palaver," and some of it the very best poetry that is being written.

Miss Monroe can therefore claim, with all modesty, a discriminating taste and judgment born of experience that is as authentic as any lyric cry from the heart of a true poet. Her advice—though she hesitates to give any—must be significant. But she admits to being "stumped"—her word—when asked to tell young American writers straining to express themselves how to learn to do it in a richer manner.

"It's a question that finds me helpless. I know of nowhere a young poet can go to improve his art. He must only write and keep on writing, read and keep on reading, the very best verse he can find."

"So many of the young poets are likely to be poor. The occasional poem a poet may sell can't keep him alive. Very few of the best poets are making money with their verse. For eight years I have been fighting to secure a traveling scholarship for poets. I think that in a short while I may be able to point to one," she smiled over her secret. "It is really deplorable that no provision is made for poor poets."

"Colleges have every assortment of scholarships and prizes amounting to thousands of dollars for architects, engineers, sculptors, painters; but none for poets—and yet poetry is fast growing to be an art of a more and more universal appeal. Poets need the cosmopolitan touch. A traveling scholarship, I believe, would be of so much help to them."

"I SHOULD advise young poets to write constantly. But to those who feel the urge such advice is scarcely necessary. But they do need to be told most especially to try their poems on editors. Let the poets see what happens when the editors get hold of them."

"The poet who writes in secret and broods over his unappreciated manuscripts usually exaggerates their importance. Self-training in solitude is the worst kind of training in the world. The poet should know his world; and, so far as his art is concerned, any kind of brooding in the world is better than his own self-indulgent brooding. Let him join, or organize, a poetry club in his school, college or neighborhood, where good poetry, old and new, may be read and discussed and his own verse slashed to pieces. If he is a poet, he will improve with the slashing. If he isn't a poet, he will find it out sooner in the world than in the closet."

"I recall a young man now." She told me about him and then asked her associates if she hadn't written something somewhere about that young man. Miss Straub thought she had, and directly found a back number, which she dog-eared.

Miss Monroe's young man was a "Byronic figure, a visitor of two or three years ago. A packet containing his diary and poems had arrived through the mail, together with a letter asking the editor to

keep the packet for the author, as he would soon be going to war. A touching faith that the poems were masterpieces was revealed between the lines of the letter, and the editor was permitted—nay, invited—to be the first to read and be convinced.

"With a sinking heart I unfolded the poems; a few were enough—they were abysmally commonplace. Not wishing to be responsible, against the hazards of life and death, for a packet so precious to its owner and of no possible value to the world; and feeling, moreover, that the young man needed a hint of disillusion, I wrote appreciating his confidence and asking him to call and talk the poems over."

"It happened that three poets were present the afternoon he called: Carl Sandburg—mellow, massive and human; a young journalist from Wisconsin, witty, clever and up-to-date; and Max Michelson, always kind, wise and sympathetic. The visitor was presented and invited to join in the touch-and-go talk on poetry and poets. Did he do so? Not he! He didn't even hear it as he sat in the remotest corner gazing at the ceiling—a darkly melancholy and handsome figure of haughty youth; and not until the others had gone would he come to life."

"Well, I went through a few poems with him, trying to lead him to some perception of their paleness, and urging him against his intellectual isolation. 'But Keats—' he protested, and paused. 'Keats was not a solitary,' I replied; 'he published his first book at twenty-one, and two or three others before he died at twenty-five—and he had excellent friends and critics, Leigh Hunt and Shelley among them.'

"The young man carried his packet away, silenced but not convinced."

And, of course, he never came back.

"Once in a while," said Miss Monroe, we meet these stranger creatures in

we have the other kind, who welcome our suggestions for change.

"One elderly lady sent a batch of printed verses to me. She said that the editor of the paper in her far-western home clamored for her verses; that she didn't want to make a fool of herself by writing them because she felt certain they were 'just silly little things.' And wouldn't I tell her the truth. Well, they were merely ordinary journalisms. I told her that, but advised her to keep on writing them. There is a need for journalisms verse. There certainly could be no harm done in publishing them, and who knows but that they might help some one to an appreciation of finer verse. I didn't put it in just that painful way, however in my letter to her."

only when the verse is so good, you know, that it ought to be better."

Miss Monroe's is too gentle a personality to permit her to feel that she is any sort of last resort in the judgment of the value of a poem. Yet there are thousands of poets, versifiers and others in the world—everybody is writing verses these days, as she says—who have faith that she approximates just that.

Her kindness—she is more of a person than an editor—to these poets is just as beautiful as a crystal poem itself. Immigrants to this country, who burn with a desire to express themselves, have found in Miss Monroe the one person who has made it possible for them to give their poems to the world. Such a one is Emanuel Car-



Aldis, Francis Shaw, Marian Strobel, Agnes Lee, Edyth Wyatt, Alice Corbin, who is now in Santa Fe for her health. Most of these write in both the old and new forms of verse. Among the men, besides the three I have already mentioned, are Emanuel Carver, W. H. Simpson, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, Cloyd Head and Henry B. Fuller, the latter better known perhaps, as novelist. All of these have published one or more books of verse."

Of course, at the head of this list should be placed Miss Monroe herself. Her books of verse, "You and I," and "The Passing Show," carry both the old and the new forms of verse, and Miss Monroe is the acknowledged pioneer in the new poetry movement.

Before I left the office I was enjoined to sign the guest-book—a book as attractive as the office itself, a treasure of autographs of poets and other literary folk whom we are accustomed to think of with a kind of awe and veneration. And even the least of human names are inscribed in this book. But how could it be otherwise in the most democratic shrine of the most democratic of arts in a country where breathe so many of those who are striving to become the most democratic of poets?

## Later Report

"HAVE you any of Blank & Co.'s coffee?" the stranger asked.

"Plenty of it, sir! How much would you like?" the dealer responded briskly.

"Do your customers generally like this coffee—I would want only something really good," the customer observed cautiously.

"Never had a more popular brand—it is fine—use it regularly on my own table," the dealer assured him.

"Well, I am glad to hear you speak so well of it now. You wrote me a while back that the goods were so unsatisfactory that you would have to return them unless you were given a further special discount. I'm Blank, you know. Good day!"

## Difficult Situation

"YOU look worried, Jack!"

"I am. I'm worried to death. I don't in the least know what to do."

"What is the problem?"

"Why, Gloria Mayfair has promised to marry me, provided my father consents—I wouldn't dare marry without his approval, as he would cut off my allowance. Of course, he won't approve until he has met the girl, yet if I introduce him to her it's a moral certainty that he will fall in love with her himself, and Gloria would be sure to throw me over for a wealthy widower like dad!"

## A Discovery

"I HAVE discovered what will totally destroy a man's memory."

"Alcohol, I suppose?"

"No."

"Tobacco?"

"Certainly not!"

"What, then?"

"The loan to him of the ten spot he will certainly not forget to return on the following Saturday."



Miss Harriet Monroe sits in a prim little office in Chicago which has an attraction for literary folk the world over

poem when all the rest of the world was dull."

Another poet—not a gifted one—who is selling nothing and who is suffering from a wasting sickness, thanks Miss Monroe over and over again because she takes time to correspond with him and talk over his verse. It is said that more than one struggling poet, in sickness, has received from out of the air, apparently, money to keep alive body and spirit—money which Miss Monroe quietly and unostentatiously has gathered together in contributions from her many friends.

"Poetry is not a magazine of big names," said Miss Strobel. "It accepts beauty wherever it writes it."

BAD poetry from acknowledged poets is as firmly refused as bad poetry from impossible poets. Upon that score Miss Monroe is adamant, fearless. "Poetry is a magazine, an art institute, where poets can exhibit their handiwork," she told me, "but the handiwork must be poetry."

Rabindranath Tagore's English translations were first published in America in Poetry. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, the poet of American minstrelsy, was "discovered" by Miss Monroe, as was nine-year-old Hilda Conkling. And Carl Sandburg was first introduced to readers by Miss Monroe.

With all her charming womanliness, Miss Monroe is a fighter. Her little gray magazine has had a rough road to travel. But she has kept it trudging along, a smiling little book, every month. In Miss Monroe is the free, battling, youthful spirit of the middle west that is giving America its noble army of singing men and women.

"England and the continent view Chicago as the center of poetry work in this country," said Miss Monroe. "I believe that is true. I think the English poets do not compare as a group with our own, and that the center of the poetry-world has shifted to America. A great number of our young poets have either been born or have settled here in the middle west. Poets seem to grow out of and thrive in the vigor and freshness of this region."

Youth was accustomed to go to New York in the other days. Too much of business is there now, perhaps. Anyway, today, youth comes west.

"Not a city in the country or anywhere, I believe, can boast such a variety and such a quality of poets as Chicago can. Edgar Lee Masters lives in Chicago, Carl Sandburg does; Vachel Lindsay lives so near Chicago that we claim him, too. Among the women poets are Florence Kipper Franck, Eunice Tiejens, Helen Hunt, Mary

our day's work. Another is the poet who will not permit any changes in his verse, who peremptorily demands that his poems be returned immediately if even a punctuation mark is to be added or taken out. And

"I am always happy to give help, provided there is any use. But I have long since found it unwise to offer suggestions unsolicited. Sometimes I feel a necessity to speak sharply to some contributors, but

nevali, who left his home in Italy when he was sixteen with only \$15 in his pockets. He writes: 'Poetry has saved my life—with a check in time when all the rest of the world was unresponsive, and with a fine

## There's Nothing New Under the Sun

IT HAS been said that there were originally only three jokes in the world—some say seven—and that from these has sprung modern humor; so people long ago learned to expect nothing new under the sun and to agree with Pliny the Elder, who, before he perished in the Vesuvian eruption of 79 A. D., remarked:

"In comparing various authors with one another, I have discovered that some of the gravest and latest writers have transcribed word for word from former works, without making acknowledgments."

Some of these transcriptions made interesting comparisons. Longfellow wrote, "Art is long, and time is fleeting." Goethe put the sentiment into German thus:

"Ach, Gott! Die Kunst ist lang, Und kurz ist unser Leben."

Which Bayard Taylor translated almost literally:

"Ah, God, but art is long, And life, alas, is fleeting."

Chaucer had said, "The life so short, the craft so long to lerne," but Hippocrates long before him had uttered the same thought. Pope said:

"Know thyself; presume not God to scan. The proper study of mankind is man."

But Chaucer said: "Full wise is he

that can himself even knowe." Cervantes put it, "Make it thy business to know thyself, which is the most difficult thing in the world." Diogenes Laertius said that Thales was the originator of this saying. Plutarch gives it to Plato, and it is found also in slightly variant forms on the tongues of Pythagoras, Chilo, Cleobolus, Bias and Socrates. Juvenal took its origin from the human realm when he says it descended from heaven.

Carlyle wrote of "One life—a little gleam of time between two eternities." Marcus Aurelius had written, "Deem not life a thing of consequence, for look at the yawning void of the future and at that other limitless space, the past." The old Saxon, Bede, likened man in his earthly life to a sparrow flying out of the dark night into the lighted banquet hall for a moment only, and then out again into the black and unknown night.

"No man is a hero to his own valet" is attributed to Madame de Sevigne. Marshal Catina said that "no man is a hero to his valet de chambre." Montaigne observed that "few men have been admired by their own domestics," and Plutarch says that Antigonus replied modestly to a eulogium, "My servant is not aware of this."

"When the candles are out, all women are fair," said Plutarch. "When all candles

be out, all cats be gray," said John Heywood, in the sixteenth century; and W. S. Gilbert sang, not so many years ago:

"She'd often passed for forty-five  
In the dusk, with a light behind her."

"To err is human; to forgive divine," wrote Pope. Plutarch had put it, "For to err in opinion, though it be not the part of wise men, is at least human."

Tertullian, in the second century, wrote that "He who flees will fight again." Goldsmith puts it:

"For he who fights and runs away  
May live to fight another day."

"To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace" is recognized as belonging to George Washington. Horace had said, "In peace, as a wise man, he should make suitable preparation for war," while Publius Syrus put it, "We should provide in peace what we need in war."

## Playing It Safe

"ONE more kiss before we part, darling!"

"Oh, haven't you had enough, dear? Save some for tomorrow night."

"I don't like to take chances. Who knows? Tomorrow night I may be dead, or you may have been eating onions!"